

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

March 8, 2007

REEF CHECK CALIFORNIA VOLUNTEER DIVER MONITORING

File No. 07-011

Project Manager: Deborah Hirst

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$243,500 to the Reef Check Foundation to expand the Reef Check California (RCCA) program's community-based network of certified volunteer SCUBA divers to collect and disseminate monitoring data on nearshore subtidal resources statewide.

LOCATION: State Waters

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Integrated Coastal and Marine Resource Protection

EXHIBITS:

Exhibit 1: Map of RCCA Monitoring Sites - California

Exhibit 2: Map of RCCA Monitoring Sites – Southern California

Exhibit 3: Reef Check Volunteer Divers

Exhibit 4: Letters of Support

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Section 31220 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed two hundred forty-three thousand, five hundred dollars (\$243,500) to the Reef Check Foundation to expand the Reef Check California (RCCA) program's community-based network of certified volunteer SCUBA divers to collect and disseminate monitoring data on nearshore subtidal resources statewide, subject to the condition that prior to the disbursement of funds, the Reef Check Foundation shall submit for the written approval of the Conservancy's Executive Officer a work program, budget, and names of any contractors it intends to employ for the project.”

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Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 5.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding integrated coastal and marine resource protection.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
3. The Reef Check Foundation is a private nonprofit organization, existing under the provisions of Section 501 (c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Service Code whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize the disbursement of up to two hundred forty-three thousand, five hundred dollars (\$243,500) to the Reef Check Foundation to expand the Reef Check California (RCCA) program’s community-based network of certified volunteer SCUBA divers to collect and disseminate monitoring data on nearshore subtidal resources statewide.

The proposed project will support RCCA’s training, communication and volunteer dive monitoring activities in Southern California, leverage program funds already secured for diver training and data collection in Central and Northern California, and enable the design and implementation of RCCA’s interactive web-based database for the dissemination of statewide data to all interested parties. Reef Check California has designed a data collection protocol in collaboration with the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) with the specific intent of collecting compatible data to support the CDFG’s monitoring of California’s growing system of Marine Protected Areas. RCCA will recruit, train and test volunteer divers to ensure collection of scientifically sound and useful habitat, invertebrate, algae, and fish abundance survey data. RCCA will promote public awareness of California’s growing network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), the need for scientific data to support resource management decisions and the opportunity for stewardship through resource monitoring activities statewide.

Background

The 1999 Marine Life Protection Act passed by the California legislature tasked the Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) with implementing an improved network of MPAs along the 1,100 mile coastline of California. To forward that effort, CDFG, the California Resources Agency and the Resource Legacy Fund Foundation developed a Memorandum of Understanding in August 2004 and launched the Marine Life Protection Act Initiative (MLPAI). Utilizing input from an extensive public process, stakeholder groups, the MLPAI Science Advisory Team and MPLAI staff, the MLPA Initiative’s Blue Ribbon Task Force brought a series of recommendations to the Fish and Game

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Commission for the establishment of an initial system of MPAs in the Central Coast region. In August 2006, the Fish and Game Commission selected a preferred alternative and CDFG will begin working toward implementing the system of Central Coast MPAs in 2007.

The Ocean Protection Council's 5-year Strategic Plan emphasizes the fundamental importance of baseline data for the implementation of the MLPA and the Marine Life Management Act (MLMA). The MLMA Master Plan specifically recognizes volunteer divers as an important asset for conducting habitat and fish abundance surveys which in turn support the development of sustainable Fishery Management Plans (Chapter 4). The final draft *California Marine Life Protection Act Initiative Central Coast Study Region Marine Protected Area Monitoring Plan* (December 6, 2006) identifies Reef Check California as a volunteer-based organization already collecting data on the focal species necessary for CDFG's management of the Central Coast MPAs. Now completing its first year, RCCA has trained 30 divers and completed data collection dives covering 12 sites in the region, 6 of which are exclusive of current monitoring efforts (Exhibit 1 and Exhibit 2). Statewide, RCCA has trained 70 divers from Humboldt County to Palm Springs and completed 20 surveys from Sonoma, Monterey, Santa Barbara, Ventura and Los Angeles Counties (Exhibit 3).

Toward the common goal of filling existing gaps in critical baseline data and supporting the implementation of the MLPA, Reef Check and CDFG have drafted a Memorandum of Understanding. The MOU's objectives include the development a long-term statewide community-based subtidal monitoring network; development and implementation of a web-based data system; and collaborative effort for effective data collection and dissemination to support the implementation and management of California's marine resources, including MPAs. A letter of support from CDFG for the RCCA program is attached (Exhibit 4).

Project Description

The proposed Reef Check California grant will extend the program's efforts to the Southern Coast region and enhance work in the North and Central Coast regions being implemented with matching funds from the Goldman Fund and the Packard Foundation. RCCA began collecting data in locations both inside and outside MPAs in the Central Coast and plans to provide similar comparison data by region as CDFG implements the statewide MPA system by 2011. RCCA is working toward the goal of training upwards of 1,000 divers statewide and has waiting lists for its scheduled 4-day training courses. The comprehensive training and testing curriculum offers an opportunity for volunteer divers with a wide range of backgrounds to collect high quality, scientifically useful species and habitat survey data. The testing standards inherent in the training along with a comprehensive quality assurance/quality control program ensure the data collected by RCCA is scientifically robust.

While RCCA has a standard software database which allows use and sharing of its data, the proposed web-based interactive database will support wider and more efficient

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dissemination of survey data to resource managers, researchers and other interested users such as students and teachers. Through its outreach and communications, RCCA will engage divers, surfers, fishermen, boaters and others in raising awareness of ocean and coastal issues and the value of stewardship. RCCA offers a significant cost-benefit by engaging volunteer divers and leveraging donations and in-kind support from the community while also building public support for MPAs and the importance of scientific data for adaptive science-based resource management and ecosystem protection.

Grantee Description

Reef Check California is a program of Reef Check Foundation (RCF), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization formed in 1997 for the purpose of promoting marine conservation world-wide. RCF is now operating volunteer diver reef monitoring and ocean resource awareness raising programs in over 80 countries. Volunteer divers who have been trained by Reef Check are able to incorporate conducting the scientifically valid surveys into their normal diving activities. The data these divers collect is pooled in a central database and made available for resource managers and all interested parties. The Reef Check California program is designed “to educate, train, and engage all ocean users in the collection of scientifically sound data describing California’s nearshore rocky reefs to help inform management decisions and create an informed constituency supportive of science-based management.” Since its inception in 2005, RCCA has worked to coordinate with related academic, nonprofit and institutional data collection efforts. RCCA benefits from the participation of CDFG and University of California scientists on its Scientific Advisory Team. The RCCA protocol was peer reviewed by the Scientific Advisory Team and is adapted from and compatible with CRANE and PISCO protocols. The extensive training program has been recognized as a specialty certification course by both NAUI and PADI, the two largest dive certification organizations.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Funding Sources 2007:

Ocean Protection Council (Coastal Conservancy)	\$243,500
Packard Foundation	\$160,000
Goldman Fund	\$125,000
Anonymous Foundation	\$25,000
SIMA	\$10,000
Other sources	<u>\$7,000</u>

Total Project Cost **\$570,500**

Staff anticipates using \$243,500 in funds appropriated to the Coastal Conservancy in the California FY06/07 State Budget from the Environmental License Plate Fund (ELPF). ELPF funds may be expended, upon appropriation by the Legislature, pursuant to the Ocean Protection Act (Division 26.5 of the Public Resources Code) in furtherance of statutory purposes that include the protection, enhancement and restoration of fish and

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wildlife habitat and related water quality. The funds were appropriated to the Conservancy to be used in coordination with the Ocean Protection Council for programs and projects that the Ocean Protection Council finds to be of high priority. The proposed project is consistent with Ocean Protection Act policies and goals that favor incorporating ecosystem perspectives into coastal and ocean resource management; using sound science; improving monitoring and data gathering; advancing scientific understanding to continually improve efforts to protect, conserve, restore, and manage coastal waters and resources; using California's private and charitable resources more effectively in developing ocean protection and conservation strategies; and providing access to the ocean and coastal resources for recreational educational and scientific purposes, consistent with sustainable long-term conservation of those resources (Public Resources Code Sections 35510, 35515). On February 8, 2007, the Ocean Protection Council reviewed this project and determined it to be of high priority.

The proposed project will provide funding for the first year of Reef Check's 3-year plan for implementing the California program statewide. Reef Check California has received commitments from a number of current supporters for its 2008 budget. The organization is developing partial self-financing support through fees for training materials and dive events and is exploring other potential sources for long-term funding.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The Reef Check California project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 5.5 (Section 31220) of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, which authorizes the implementation of projects that protect and/or restore marine habitat and promote integrated coastal and marine resource protection. The Conservancy may undertake projects that meet any of the objectives specified in subsection (b) of Section 31220 of the Public Resources Code. Consistent with Section 31220 subsection (b)(5), the proposed project will provide monitoring of marine habitats and marine wildlife in order to facilitate the protection and enhancement of resources within the coastal zone.

In addition, pursuant to Section 31220 (b)(10), the project will promote sustainable management through improved knowledge about the location and nature of state marine resources and is consistent with the goals of the California Ocean Protection Act, Public Resources Code Division 26.5.

The Department of Fish and Game has been consulted with regard to this project, as required by Section 31220(b)(5). The project includes a monitoring and evaluation component and is consistent with adopted state and regional watershed planning as described below under "Consistency with Local Watershed Management Plans/State Water Quality Control Plan." In addition, as required by Section 31220(a), Conservancy staff has consulted with the State Water Resources Control Board in the development of this project in order to ensure consistency with the Clean Beaches Program under Chapter 3 of Division 20.4 of the Public Resources Code.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL WATERSHED MANAGEMENT PLANS/STATE WATER QUALITY CONTROL PLAN:

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The purpose of local coastal watershed management plans is to prevent water quality degradation and to protect the beneficial uses of coastal waters. Water quality control plans adopted by the State Water Resources Control Board are designed to focus resources on key issues, promote the use of sound science, and promulgate cooperative, collaborative efforts in coastal areas to protect and enhance coastal waters. As a scientific monitoring project that includes coastal waters of California, the proposed project is consistent with this purpose as it will promote the sustainable use of coastal resources and protection of marine habitat. For the same reasons, the proposed project is also consistent with the policies of the 2001 California Ocean Plan that states, “the beneficial uses of the ocean waters of the State that shall be protected include...water contact and non-contact recreation; aesthetic enjoyment; commercial and sport fishing;...preservation and enhancement of designated Areas of Special Biological Significance (ASBS); rare and endangered species; marine habitat; (and) fish migration.”

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS & OBJECTIVES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Strategic Plan as it supports Goal 6 by benefiting coastal marine resources through the monitoring of marine habitat and marine wildlife, which will promote sustainable use and management of coastal and marine resources.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the “Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation” section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
3. **Support of the public:** Reef Check California relies on volunteer SCUBA divers' participation and support to conduct its monitoring activities and has the support of academic and partner agencies (For letters of support, see Exhibit 4).
4. **Location:** The proposed project will be implemented in Southern California with additional activities throughout the state to monitor California's nearshore resources.
5. **Need:** Conservancy funding is necessary to expand the project to Southern California, leveraging other sources of funding that would not be sufficient for the statewide data collection and dissemination goals of the project.

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6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The proposed project will provide an opportunity for ocean stewardship through volunteer SCUBA dive training and monitoring along the entire state of California and will provide data of interest to worldwide study of ocean resources and resource protection.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** The proposed project will support the expansion of the Reef Check California program at the time the Marine Protected Areas are being established through new areas off California. The state-wide project would not be fully implemented without this support from the Conservancy.
8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The proposed project offers both stewardship and outreach opportunities for the public while also providing scientifically robust data of use for the Department of Fish and Game in the management of nearshore resources.
9. **Leverage:** Reef Check California will leverage Conservancy funds with existing commitments from Packard Foundation and other funding partners. In addition, the nonprofit is seeking support from volunteers and public-private partnerships with the ocean related business community.
10. **Readiness:** Reef Check California is already successfully recruiting and training divers in Northern and Central California and is ready to implement the program in Southern California and proceed with development and utilization of the statewide database.
11. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See “Background” above.
12. **Cooperation:** Reef Check California has worked cooperatively with the Department of Fish and Game to develop a Memorandum of Understanding. In addition, Reef Check has built relationships for input from scientific and academic communities, ocean user groups, conservation organizations and resource management agencies throughout the state. The organization relies on recruiting and training community volunteers to fulfill its mission.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed project is categorically exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15306 (data collection, research and resources evaluation activities which do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource). The proposed project will not result in disturbance to the marine environment or its wildlife. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval.